

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands was created by Congress in March 1865 to assist for one year in the transition from slavery to freedom in the South. The Bureau was given "the supervision and management of all abandoned lands, and the control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen, under such rules and regulations as may be presented by the head of the Bureau and approved by the President."

**The Bureau's task was to help the Southern blacks and whites make the transition from a society based on slavery to one allowing freedom.**

The bureau was run by the War Department, and its first and most important commissioner was General O.O. Howard, a Civil War hero sympathetic to blacks. The Bureau's task was to help the Southern blacks and whites make the transition from slavery to freedom.



Their responsibilities included introducing a system of free labor, overseeing some 3,000 schools for freedpersons, settling disputes and enforcing contracts between the usually white landowners and their black labor force, and securing justice for blacks in state courts. The Bureau was renewed by a Congressional bill in 1866 but was vetoed by President Andrew Johnson, who thought it was unconstitutional. Johnson was opposed to having the federal government secure black rights. Congress passed the bill over his veto. Southern whites were basically opposed to blacks having any rights at all, and the Bureau lacked military force to back up its authority as the army had been quickly disbanded and most of the soldiers assigned to the Western frontier. The Bureau was able to accomplish some of its goals, especially in the field of education. It established a number of colleges and training schools for blacks, including Howard University (named for General Howard) and Hampton Institute. Howard believed that the mission of the Bureau was a temporary one, wanting to avoid black dependency on the federal agency. He firmly believed that African Americans should obtain all their rights as quickly as possible, but failed to see that because of Southern white hostility long-term support was necessary for them to do so. The Bureau also failed to bring together whites and blacks in the South because it lacked the means to do so. It needed support from Southern and Northern politicians and received little help from either. Its staff was cut significantly by 1869 and it ceased operations in 1872.

-- Richard Wormser